

Quakers have long resisted sacraments—preferring to say that all of life is sacred
Not 2 sacraments or 7 sacraments as many denominations would say
But God can bring the Holy to bear on any object, person, or situation that God chooses
All of life is sacramental
There is no separation between sacred and secular

A Quaker, Wilmer Cooper says: Friends have developed the testimony about the sacramental view of all life, maintaining that it is not just in special sacramental events (such as baptism and communion) that we experience the grace of God, but that all occasions of life and every meal have the potential to become sacred means of God's grace... This concept of the sacramental view of life also coincides with the Quaker testimony that there are no uniquely sacred times (days) or places; instead, all of life has the possibility of becoming an outward sign of an inward grace.¹

Quakers have put the emphasis on the reality not the symbol of the reality
Not the shadow, but the substance
Not the image, but that which the image represents
It is about Living in the Presence of the Living God—talking directly to God about everything
Friends have often said that if we have the reality of God's Presence—we have enough
If we don't have that reality—nothing else will suffice—nothing makes up for it

Symbols are stationary, unchanging, frozen, while the Life of the Spirit which they symbolize
is flowing, growing, changing, ever becoming richer
God is always immediate and present—and in that moment, God is completely unexpected
We cannot limit God to certain methods or ways of being with us
There is a sense in which this Life is like a roller coaster—full of God surprises

To create an adequate symbol of this kind of God life among us in itself is most difficult
How can any symbol adequately represent the intimacy of life with God?
The God life experience changes and the symbol rapidly becomes obsolete/inadequate
Even the symbolic expression of a simple truth like equality is easily outdated
Quakers tried it with plain dress—a powerful symbol of equality and simplicity
But then it became a “uniform” that didn't speak of the original intent
Or with the language “thee” and “thou”—symbols of equality grew antiquated
It could be likened to a pot bound plant where the roots need more room

But what about symbols? Is there an appropriate place for symbols among Quakers?
Symbols generally have a large place in religions, whether it be the sacramental symbols or others
We use symbols or images regularly as an aid at understanding what is unexplainable
At Easter we enjoyed thinking about the symbolism of daffodils and resurrection life
Is there in fact, a rightful understanding of the use of symbols in our midst?

Even language becomes a symbol—an attempt to express the experience with words
If seen as simply an attempt to express that which is unexplainable and changing—OK
But when the words become codified and rigid they lose their power to tell the truth of God
It becomes easy to shift into form vs substance—devise creeds that all must adhere to

¹ Wilmer Cooper, *A Living Faith*, pages 93-94

Even the temptation I encountered—the sense that certain phrases meant you got it
I'm saved—I've been born again—Jesus is my Lord and Savior—etc.

Yet the alternative of silence and refusal to talk about the intimate journey doesn't work either
We need mentors and people willing to journey with us in this God life
We need people to tell how it works inside—what they are sensing and feeling
To use words to attempt to share the unexplainable

But these words, rather than becoming a static symbol that can be repeated
Are better seen as pointing to something beyond themselves—pointing to a reality
Like one pointing to something—the emphasis is not on the finger but the place beyond

The underlying impulse to use symbolism is to communicate
It is our nature to try to communicate what is important to us—to share our experiences
Symbols are the media of communication of the depth of the spiritual life
As much as we want to share the glory of the sunrise with another person
It's natural that we want to share the transforming grace of our God journey with others
And that's a good thing!

And so we use words!
But the words point to a deeper reality—they express something of what is beyond

The caution that Quakers call us back to is to be aware that the symbol can lose power and meaning
The symbol can become an empty representation, which cruelly kills the movement of the Spirit
Rather than static symbols—Quakers are drawn to symbols that are used momentarily
Or at least momentarily in the long span of religious life
This really meshes with the idea that all of life is sacred and that God can inhabit anything
God is God and God chooses where to show up
Rather than a codified expected time and place—God will appear whenever
Whether it be when we are open or life happens or...
The symbolic representation can speak to that which has occurred
But we are cautious to assume that it is for others or for all time
So the symbols are constantly being recreated to speak to the now of experience

Another expression of symbolism is in the doing—in our lived out behaviors and callings to ministry
Out of our lived experience with God comes a greater sense of calling—to do the God work
These “doings” in themselves becomes symbols of the God life experience
Historically Quakers have acted out their beliefs of equality, integrity, peace in powerful ways
These actions become symbols of the greater God truth
We take great delight in blessing Patty's work in Burundi
But it is a symbol of the power of quilting to be used for trauma healing
Donna's “You Are Loved” sign at the mosque is a symbol of our respect for all people
Mark's work with the social venture competition at Seattle Pacific University
Is a symbol of knowing that there is economic good beyond pure profit making
That a new model of partnering business with social action can be successful
Dove's activism is a symbol of justice and our belief that all are created equal
The power of symbolism with actions is that it is dynamic, responding to the needs around it

Yet we must be aware that things like programs set up to further our actions can become outmoded
It is incumbent among us to recognize when a need has been met
Or when our specific calling is no longer central to our greater callings
Out of an abundance of children's educators and a need for affordable day care—
The church started Kinder Kampus—a powerful symbol of care for children and education
But both starting impetus shifted
The church no longer had an abundance of people called to educate children
There were many daycares and we were not more affordable than others
This calling was no longer our central calling as a church
Recognized when we couldn't spend \$200,000 estimated
To remodel the church so it was truly safe and good for children
Therefore we laid it down
Humans aren't good at recognizing when things have run their course
But for symbols to be powerful enactments of a greater truth, this is an essential task

Symbolism through images, words, and deeds can all be powerful expressions of an inner truth
They point to the inexplicable and unexplainable
They are not substitutes for that which is beyond the symbol
Yet they call us to something more
They call us into the Presence of the Living God
"all of life has the possibility of becoming an outward sign of an inward grace" (Cooper)